

“THE REST OF GOD” GENESIS 2:1-3

For the next few Sundays we are going to take a break from our exposition of Matthew’s Gospel so that we can address the topic of Sabbath. If you were here the last two weeks you might remember that Sabbath was the subject in the first part of Matthew 12. It is a frequent subject in the Gospels because the Sabbath was on the forefront of the minds of Jesus’ audience. Sabbath-keeping was one of the three most prominent distinctives of Jewish identity.

But it is not so prominent a subject nowadays with God’s people, at least in Western Christianity, and for at least a couple of reasons. First, in a culture of nonstop doing, going, and producing, in a culture in which every conceivable good and service is available at our fingertips, in a culture in which our time saving devices and technological conveniences have turned us into a hyperactive, obsessive community, we have little interest in something that invites us to stop, be still, and take a break. The very *idea* of Sabbath has been suffocated by our culture.

But there is something else. In Western Christianity opinions and interpretations about the Sabbath are so numerous and so varied that it has become a sore subject for many. It is a subject about which we argue and over which we start whole denominations. And as with most theological subjects, people tend to go to extremes in their positions. Some view the Sabbath much like the Pharisees did in Jesus’ day, and are nearly as rigid in how they keep it. Others are dismissive of the Sabbath, relegating it to another dispensation and putting it in the same category as the Jewish sacrificial system that was made obsolete by Jesus’ death on cross. Both extremes have developed elaborate theological constructs and rationales to support their views.

As a result, there is a great deal of confusion in the Christian community about what the Sabbath is, what it means, and how it does or does not apply to us today. And for this reason, many have chosen to ignore the subject altogether and hope that God will be gracious if, in fact, they are missing the mark.

I want to say from the outset that the Sabbath was never meant to be complicated or contentious or controversial. It was never intended to be a dreaded chore or a rote ritual. It was intended to be a simple, gracious gift, given for our benefit that we might flourish. I hope you will come to that conclusion in our study and be able to delight in this gift so that *you* can flourish.

To begin this series, I am going to do something that I rarely do. I am going to read four key passages of Scripture about the Sabbath, one after another, to make sure we get started on a biblical foundation, and that our thoughts and perceptions from beginning to end are shaped by the Word of God. By the way, I preach topical sermons the same way I preach books of the Bible verse-by-verse. I am going to *extract* the meaning from the text by using inductive Bible study principles and procedures (hermeneutics) so that we can know with what the text of Scripture means. I am going to try very hard not to insert my opinions about this topic, and if you discover that I am doing so, I invite you to call me out.

The first passage is in the creation narrative in Genesis 2. **Verses 1-3.** *Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. ² And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation” (Gen. 2:1-3).*

Now, look at Exodus 20, in which the command to remember the Sabbath is the fourth of the Ten Commandments. **Verses 8-11.** ⁸“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Exodus 20:8-11).

Now, look at Isaiah 58 in which the Lord talks about the Sabbath in the context of restoring the spiritual health and prosperity of Israel if they return to him and obey His commands.

¹³ “If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath,
from doing your pleasure on my holy day,
and call the Sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly;
¹⁴ then you shall take delight in the LORD,
and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Isaiah 58:13-14)

Finally, in the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus was addressing the Pharisees over their accusation that His disciples had broken the law by plucking some heads of grain and eating them on the Sabbath, Jesus said, *“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).*

All of these passages will be relevant in our series on the Sabbath. They are going to help us understand what Sabbath is, what it means, why it is necessary, and what God may want us do about it.

So, let’s go back to *Genesis* and explore in greater depth what God was doing when He established a day of rest in the beginning. Look again at Genesis 2:1-3. **Verse 1.** *Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.*

This statement comes on the heels of the creation narrative where we are told that God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them in six consecutive days. We are told that God *spoke* all of creation into being—“Let there be light...let there be a division of the waters...let there be dry land...let there be vegetation...let there be living creatures, etc.” And on the sixth day, after God created Adam and Eve, we are told that He saw everything He had made and behold, it was all *very good*.

But now look at **verse 2.** ² *And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.*

God rested on the seventh day. The question is “why?” Was He tired? Did God *need* to rest because He was worn out by all the work He had done on the previous six days? As Scripture unfolds we discover that two of the most prominent attributes about God are that He is *infinite* and *self-sufficient*. This means, in part, that His strength and energy do not need to be generated. It means that His capacities and capabilities have no limits. In other words, God doesn’t get depleted and He doesn’t need to be replenished. He doesn’t have needs, and therefore doesn’t get tired or require rest. It means that His work of creation

wasn't difficult for Him, and it didn't take anything out of Him.

So, God didn't rest on the seventh day because He needed it; He rested from His work for the benefit of creation—specifically, mankind. Even though Adam and Eve were created in God's image, they weren't created infinite or self-sufficient. God created them with needs. Adam needed a helper, because it was not good for man to be alone. Adam and Eve needed food and water, they needed relationships, they needed sleep, they needed rest. Needs are not bad. Needs are not the result of sin. Man's needs existed before sin entered the world.

So, our need for rest does not point to our sinfulness but to the very way God created us and designed us to function. As someone said, "Our bodies move to a rhythm of work and rest that follows the rhythm originally strummed by God on the waters of creation. As God worked, so shall we; as God rested, so shall we. Working and resting, we who are human are in the image of God" (Diana Butler, *Receiving the Day*, 48).

Humans need rest. Animals need rest. Land needs rest. It's the way God created the universe. Without rest things don't function the way He intended them to function. Without rest, things inevitably get weaker until they fall apart. It's the law of creation.

And so God rested on the seventh day for *our* benefit, not for His. We were created with a need for rest, and God was sanctioning that rest, approving that rest, blessing that rest when He Himself rested on the seventh day. He was expressing His generosity and goodness by giving us a day of rest as a gift. Remember the words of Jesus, "*Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath*" (Mark 2:27).

It is interesting and significant that in the creation stories of the nations that surrounded Israel in the ancient world, including the Egyptians and Phoenicians, people were created to be slaves of their gods. Their gods were perceived to be slave-drivers who worked their creatures to the bone and would get angry when they rested. None of these religions included rest in their creation narratives, and no other gods allowed their creatures to rest.

What does the one, true God's establishment of a day of rest reveal about Him? He is gracious, He is compassionate, He is good, He is kind. He loves us. As the Psalmist said, "*He knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust*" (Psalm 103:14). Since He created us, He knows our needs, our weaknesses, and our vulnerabilities, and He makes provision for them.

But there is something else that is instructive in **verse 2**. *² And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.*

On what day were Adam and Eve created? The sixth day. Which means that their very first day of being alive on this earth was a day of rest. Did they need to rest? No. I assure that they were not tired or exhausted after God created them. They were wide-eyed and ready and raring to go. So, what *did* they need? What did God have in mind for them on that day after they were created?

I would suggest to you that Adam and Eve needed an *orientation*. They needed to connect and commune with their Creator. They needed undivided, uninterrupted time with Him so they could learn who He was, who they were, how much He loved them, and how privileged they were to have a personal, loving relationship with Him. It was an opportunity to be fully present and fully engaged with Him, without any distractions—even *good* distractions like the Garden of Eden.

And I believe there is significance in the timing of this first Sabbath as it relates to our purpose as human beings. We were created for God. We were created to be in relationship with God, and the fact that God set aside the day after he created Adam and Eve as a day

to spend with Him in His presence reveals His priority for this relationship. As John Piper puts it, “The chief end of man is to glorify God *by* enjoying Him forever,” and God gave the gift of Sabbath so that this enjoyment might be profoundly experienced.

By the way, this may be the first hint of the gospel in Scripture. The fact that God ordained a day of rest as the first full day of mankind’s existence teaches us that we don’t work to earn that privilege. The day of rest is a gift that proves that God was pleased with Adam and Eve before they had done any work at all to prove to Him how pleasing they were. Our intimacy with Him is not based on our work, but on *His* work in creating us for Himself. “Sabbath is a scheduled weekly reminder that we are not what we do; rather, we are who we are loved by” (Swoboda).

Let’s move on to **verse 3**. ³ *So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation” (Gen. 2:3).*

The author of Genesis is emphasizing that God did something to the seventh day that would set it apart from all other days. First, He *blessed* it. He made it special; He made it extraordinary. He infused it with greater significance than other days. And I assume that part of what this means is that we can benefit more on and from this day than any other.

He also made it holy. It is interesting that the only thing that God deems “holy” in the creation story is the seventh day. He didn’t identify the earth as holy, or creatures as holy, or Adam and Eve as holy, or the Garden of Eden as holy. Only the seventh day was declared holy. And the reason it was declared holy is given in the last part of **verse 3**. “...*Because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.*”

What makes the Sabbath holy is not what we do or do not do on that particular day. It’s not holy because of the way we observe it, or the attitudes we have on it, or the approach we take toward it. What makes the Sabbath holy is what God did on that day. He chose to cease from His work of creation and rest. He chose to celebrate what He had made. And, more specifically, He chose to delight in the pinnacle of His creation, Adam and Eve, so that they could know Him and delight in Him.

But what does it mean that the seventh day is *holy*? I’m pretty sure that when some of us hear the word “holy” we immediately think of *religious stuff*. We associate “holy” with mysterious rituals, or restrictive rules, or lists of do’s and don’ts. The Pharisees, in their attempt to keep the Sabbath holy, devised 39 rules of what *not* to do on the Sabbath because they thought that’s what God meant by “holy.”

But that’s not what it means, and Jesus confirmed this over and over in the Gospel accounts. The Hebrew word translated “holy” (*qadosh*) essentially means “to set apart,” “to dedicate,” or “to consecrate.” And so by making the seventh day holy God was setting it apart from all other days as a day that would be dedicated or consecrated to Him.

So what does it mean to dedicate or consecrate this day to God? I think if I could distill the answer to this in one word it would be *re-orientation*. Let me explain.

I told you that on that first seventh day, the day in which God rested, it was not a day that Adam and Eve needed to rest, because they hadn’t done any work yet that would make them tired. It was a day of *orientation*—a day for them to connect and commune with their Creator, a day of discovery as to who He was, who they were, how much He loved them, and how privileged they were to have a personal, loving relationship with Him.

But since we are finite and dependent creatures (as opposed to God who is infinite and self-sufficient), we have needs, and those needs must be attended to. We have to eat, we have to drink, we have to sleep, we have to take care of our bodies, etc. The problem is, we don’t always attend to our needs. We can ignore them or neglect them, and when we

do, we suffer the consequences.

That's true if we don't have a balanced diet, or if we don't get enough exercise, or if we don't take time to rest. God created mankind with needs, but God also created a seven-day week and designated one of those days to be set apart as a day of rest. That is His gracious gift to us so that we can function at our optimal best. And that is a pattern or a rhythm that He built into the DNA of creation. He knows, because He created us, that we need one day out of seven to be renewed and replenished and refreshed.

If we ignore that gift or neglect to use that gift there will be negative consequences for us, especially if we ignore or neglect it regularly. We will succumb to exhaustion, burn-out, depression, and a host of other ills that will prevent us from functioning as God intended us to function.

In 1793, France, in an effort to increase human productivity, de-Christianized the calendar by modifying the seven-day week to a ten-day week. New clocks were invented to reflect the revised week. But the experiment radically failed. Suicide rates sky-rocketed, people burned out, and production decreased. Why? Because humans were not created to work nine straight days and then rest one. We were made to work six days and rest one. The seven-day rhythm is sacred. It is a reflection of the wisdom of the God who created our bodies (Swoboda, *Subversive Sabbath*, 10-11).

And that is why, in the Ten Commandments, God said, **Exodus 20:8-11**. ⁸ *“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Exodus 20:8-11).*

God told His people to remember the Sabbath, knowing that they would be inclined to ignore or neglect it. God told them to keep the Sabbath holy, knowing that they would be inclined to make compromises or concessions that would make it just like any other day. But the thing I want you to especially notice in this passage is what God says in **verse 10**. *“The seventh day is a Sabbath **to** the LORD your God.”* It is a day in which we can be *re-oriented* to the One who created us to delight in Him, and the One who knows that the only way we can be truly healthy, the only way we can function at our optimal best, is when we delight in Him.

Most of us have responsibilities Monday through Friday in which we are doing some kind of work. Most of us spend the better part of each day and devote most of our strength and energy trying to be productive at whatever we are doing. So our minds and hearts are not necessarily on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, but on things of this earth that enable us to make a living and provide for our families. In the course of that week, because our work compels us to focus on the things of this world, we can inadvertently succumb to the notion that the things in this world are what really matters, the things of this world are of ultimate importance, not things above.

God, in His wisdom and grace, set aside a day out of the week to get re-oriented to things above. It's a day that is dedicated to Him—a Sabbath **to** the LORD our God. It's a day in which we can be removed from the clamor of the world and be reminded that He is what really matters, and our relationship with Him is of ultimate importance. And the way to do that, according to God, perhaps the only way we *can* do that, is by ceasing from our work.

Winnie-the-Pooh made a profound statement: “Don't underestimate the value of

Doing Nothing, of just going along, listening to all the things you can't hear, and not bothering" (*The Complete Tales of Winnie-the-Pooh*).

Someone else said, "What is this life if, full of care, we don't take time to sit and stare?" The answer is, "Not much." When we don't take time, we become vulnerable to exhaustion, burn-out, depression, spiritual anemia, and a host of other ills. We're not living as God intended us to live.

Next time we are going to continue to explore what it means and what it may look like to set apart a day to delight in the Lord. But I'd like to close by reading again the passage from Isaiah that describes the benefits of setting a day apart to the Lord. **Isaiah 58:13-14**.

- ¹³ *"If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath,
from doing your pleasure on my holy day,
and call the Sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly;*
- ¹⁴ *then you shall take delight in the LORD,
and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."* (Isaiah 58:13-14)

“The Rest of God”

Gen. 2:1-3; Ex. 20:8-11; Isa. 58:13-14

Main Idea: The God who created us for Himself gave us the gift of setting aside one day a week to be released from our work in order to be re-oriented and replenished in His presence

The **Gift** of the Sabbath

The infinite, self-sufficient God who “rested”

The Creator who knows His creatures

Mankind was created to rest

“Sabbath was made for man...” (Jesus)

The timing of the Sabbath

Adam and Eve’s *first* day

An orientation to one’s Creator

The priority of relationship

The **Sacredness** of the Sabbath

The **Purpose** of the Sabbath

A day of re-orientation

A day of rest

The **Practice** of the Sabbath

In the Jewish community

In church history

In the contemporary church

